

Lessons From the Blind & Lessons in Leadership: Knowledge Sharing East & West by Todd Post

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Dr. Alexander Laufer has a model called IQ Plus. Basically, if you bring experienced people together to talk, share stories, and test new ideas, the collective IQ of the group is greater than any one individual's IQ.

I had the pleasure of observing IQ Plus in action by attending my first APPL Knowledge Sharing Conference in December. Project managers from NASA Centers around the U.S. gathered to talk about project management, to listen and connect their experiences, to explore innovative concepts, and to discuss new tools.

The first two days, December 4-5, were in Atlanta, December 6-7 in San Francisco. The conference is held in two locations so that NASA project managers on the East and West Coasts do not have to travel far from their Centers to attend.

In Atlanta, keynote speaker Terry Little, Program Director for the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile Program and one of the Defense Department's most seasoned program managers, raised the temperature in the room with his interactive presentation "Cheaper, Faster, Better In Action." Following opening remarks by Dr. Michelle Collins and a brief presentation on APPL activities abroad by Dr. Edward Hoffman, Mr. Little led a spirited discussion for nearly two hours on managing risk, working in teams, selecting contractors and cultivating relationships with them. He also spoke about such wide-open issues as what does "leadership" mean in terms of project management. Dr. Laufer introduced Terry Little as 'the most radical and most creative Project Manager' in the Air Force. At 55, Terry Little's most radical feat may be his longevity in the Air Force. He has been challenging the status quo in the Air Force since 1967, and it is obviously a



Todd Post demonstrates ASK magazine to KS participants.

role he relishes, advising his audience "Deal with barriers and obstacles ruthlessly."

After the keynote presentation and the discussion that followed, we moved to a cozier location outside the conference room in

front of the Emory Center's magnificent stone fireplace. As the warmth of the fire helped folks to unwind, I seized the opportunity to get some feedback on ASK Magazine.

It was a great opportunity for feedback because several of those who had articles in the magazine were present. Richard Day, whose Best Practice on "Supplier Integration" appears in the first issue, sat down and I showed him his article laid out for the first time. Another person who came by was Steve Gonzalez, a soft-spoken project manager from Johnson Space Center, who read the articles with interest and then graciously thanked me for showing him the magazine.

None of us in Atlanta was prepared for the stunning presentation Steve gave the next morning entitled "What About the Passion? The Changing Face of NASA." Presentations were ostensibly about "The Role of Systems Engineering in the Faster, Better, Cheaper Era," but if that's how they began, there was no telling where any would end up as audience participation dictated the discussion more than anything.

In Steve's presentation, he talked about how a group of engineers in the Command and Control Center at Johnson built a working lab out of a dream of what they thought NASA should become by the year 2076. Part of their intention was to regain systems engineering skills they felt they'd lost to contractors who now had greater control of the hands-on work at the Center. But that was only the half of it. The real story was the courage and conviction of Steve and his colleagues who put together a plan that basically redefined the cutting edge at NASA.



NASA project manager Dougla MacLise at Knowledge Sharing West in San Francisco.

In San Francisco, where the conference resumed next day, Dr. Robert Sutton, Professor of Management Science and Engineering at Stanford University and co-author of *The Knowing-Doing Gap* with Stanford colleague Dr. Jeffrey Pfeffer, gave

the keynote address. Sutton and Pfeffer's premise is that despite the expensive and time consuming efforts of many companies to try to improve their organization through education and training and by hiring management consulting firms and reading all the latest research, the bottom line is that few actually bring about any significant change in their management practices. Pfeffer and Sutton sought to find out why there is such a discrepancy between a company's best intentions and their actual accomplishments. NASA project managers had plenty to say about this, but out of respect for those who let it all hang out I'll be discreet and just note you should have been there.

As in Atlanta, the second day began with a diverse group of presentations. These all came under the broad heading "Challenging the System," and what the project managers came up with was as idiosyncratic as you'd expect given such freedom to be inventive.

"Poignant" is not a word we expect to use about a presentation at a NASA conference, but that may be the best word to describe Dougal MacLise's presentation, "Lessons from the Blind," about his first job after graduating college and working for the Portland Public Schools as an equipment designer for handicapped children. Dougal read a story about working with a blind boy named Bobby Smith, helping him to walk alone from his house to school.

On a cursory reading of the story there would appear to be no apparent relationship between a blind boy and NASA project managers, but as we discussed after Dougal's reading, we considered it as metaphor for the challenges faced by project managers daily. What made the story so compelling was the many ways it could be interpreted, and the project managers who had the good fortune to be there appeared to have no lack of imagination in coming up with interpretations. Everyone seemed to be able to relate to the plight of the blind boy, and to Dougal's plight as well.

Interestingly, no presentation in either Atlanta or San Francisco elicited as much participation as this one, in part, I'm sure, because of its novelty. I was



In San Francisco, KS participants discuss Colin Powell's "18 Lessons on Leadership."

blown away by how creative the project managers were about what could be learned from parables so seemingly unrelated to NASA. Indeed, as the title of the story makes clear, there were lessons to be learned from the blind, and we studied them.

Both the Atlanta and San Francisco meetings ended with a group discussion of an article by Secretary of State Colin Powell entitled "18 Lessons on Leadership." Project managers were put together in small groups to discuss 6 of the 18 lessons. "Lessons" may not be the best word to describe them, however. They were more like aphorisms, ranging from familiar advice such as "Don't be afraid to challenge the pros, even in their own backyards" to glib musings of the sort "Command is lonely" and "Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier."

Project managers read the assigned lessons and discussed their relevance in terms of their day-to-day experiences at NASA. Thinking back to Dr. Laufer's theory of IQ Plus, I would argue it's group activities like this that provide the greatest opportunity to realize the utility of collaboration, dialogue, and story telling.

The individual presentations are great, interesting, compelling, and sometimes, as in the cases of Dougal MacLise and Steve Gonzalez, spellbinding; but the most value for the buck at a conference like this seems to me to be these group activities where everyone is involved. The more people involved, the more knowledge there is to share.

For me, attending the conference certainly increased my appreciation of the challenges faced by NASA's best, and it emphasized the importance of knowledge sharing as a professional development tool. It was also a great introduction to many people I look forward to meeting again and learning more from about project management and its ups and downs. See you at the next one.

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